

# ADDRESSING DEPRESSION AT WORK

Mergers...acquisitions...downsizing...restructuring...outsourcing...globalization...information overload...high demand — low control...do more with less...be responsive to the customer!

By Thomas P. Guck, Ph.D.

Read these words rapidly and you get a sense for what the American workforce is experiencing. While these factors have sparked a period of unprecedented economic growth and the longest sustained stock market advance in our nation's history, they have also contributed to a number of negative, unintended consequences. Of which, the most damaging has been perhaps the toll taken on the emotional well-being of our nation's workers.

As Michael Mazaar, from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, states in his book, *Global Trends 2005*, "one especially frightening indication that something may be amiss in human psychology at the turn of the millennium is the increase in clinical depression around the world. Depression is now, in terms of victims and economic impact, the world's second most insidious illness, behind heart disease. It is estimated that 330 million people worldwide suffer from depression."

Despite the pervasiveness of depression, it is often not discussed and worse yet, not treated. R. William Whitmer, CEO of the Health Enhancement Research Organization believes, "Depression is a closet disease." While this sentiment is still true, there may be some hope on the horizon.

High profile individuals such as Mike Wallace, Tipper Gore, Art Buchwald, and William Styron have all acknowledged depression in their lives and have openly discussed the need for greater awareness and treatment.

The general public is also beginning to recognize the need for information on depression. In fact, a recent Harris poll found that at least 60 million people searched the web for health information in 1999—a number that has most certainly escalated in recent years. It was interesting to note that four of the top ten most highly sought after health topics were related to mental health. Interestingly, depression was ranked number one.

## High Costs of Depression

Plain and simple, depression costs billions of dollars every year. In fact, a RAND Corporation study found that patients with depressive symptoms spend more days in bed than those with diabetes, arthritis, back problems, lung problems, or gastrointestinal disorders.

The total cost of depression to the nation in 1990 was estimated at \$30-\$44 billion—a number that has also escalated significantly in recent years. Of this amount, \$12 billion are attributed to lost workdays due to depression.

More than \$11 billion in other costs accrue from decreased productivity due to symptoms that sap energy, affect work habits, cause problems with concentration, memory, and decision-making. Costs escalate further if a worker's untreated depression contributes to alcoholism or drug abuse.

The Health Enhancement Research Organization (HERO) studied the correlation between ten health risks and direct medical costs of 46,000 employees and found that self-reported depression was the single most expensive risk factor identified. In fact, the 2.2% of employees who reported depression incurred 70% higher direct healthcare costs! What's more, these figures don't include costs associated with absenteeism and productivity loss.

As if direct medical and productivity costs for self-reported depression aren't enough, American industry also pays dearly for the millions of people who don't report their depression. Perhaps these individuals don't realize their symptoms are more than occasional bad moods. Or, perhaps, they're afraid or ashamed to admit to their depression. Regardless of their individual rationale, those who have untreated depression are estimated to cost \$1,700 more per year for medical care than non-depressed individuals.

It is now estimated that depression affects more than 19 million American adults (9.5% of the population). In fact, at any given time, 1 in 20 employees is suffering from depression. It is of the utmost importance to note that depression is not a passing mood or personal weakness—it is a treatable condition. Further, no job category or professional level is immune, and even high performing employees can be affected.

## Signs and Symptoms of Depression

Despite the enormous costs associated with depression, more than 80% of depressed people can be treated quickly and effectively.

The first step to successful treatment is early recognition of the symptoms of depression.

The symptoms of depression are unique from feelings of occasional sadness. To clarify, depression occurs when feelings of extreme sadness or despair last for at least two weeks and also if they interfere with activities of daily living—including work. The mnemonic device presented in *Figure 1* can be helpful in assessing the symptoms of depression.

If five or more of the symptoms presented in *Figure 1* persist for more than two weeks, or interfere with an individual's work or family life, a thorough diagnosis is needed. This diagnosis should include a complete physical checkup and history of family health problems as well as an evaluation of possible symptoms of depression.


## The Depressed Workplace

As illustrated in the first section of this article, depression adversely impacts the workplace. As a result, depression in the workplace should be identified and treated. In addition to the general symptoms of depression presented in *Figure 1*, there are specific symptoms of depression unique to the workplace. These symptoms of depression may include:

- Decreased productivity
- Lack of cooperation
- Absenteeism
- Frequent statements about being tired all the time
- Complaints of unexplained aches and pains
- Morale problems
- Safety risks and/or accidents
- Alcohol and drug abuse

If these symptoms of depression are present in the workplace, their successful treatment begins with an alertness and sensitivity by the wellness practitioner. As a wellness practitioner, you

Figure 1



### SIG E CAPS + Mood

This important mnemonic device stands for Signature for Energy Capsules and can be a helpful tool in better understanding and addressing the signs and symptoms of depression. Here is a brief explanation:

- S**leep — too much, too little, disturbance with onset delay or early morning awakening
- I**nterest — markedly diminished interest or pleasure in almost all activities
- G**uilt — feeling of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt
- E**nergy — fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day
- C**oncentration — diminished ability to think or concentrate, indecisiveness
- A**ppetite — decrease/ increase in appetite, significant weight loss/gain without dieting
- P**sycomotor agitation/retardation — one or the other daily, observable by others
- S**uicide — recurrent suicidal ideation with or without a specific plan
- M**ood — depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day

can help! *Figure 2* presents six tips and strategies for treating depression in the workplace.

## Understanding the Treatment of Depression

Obtaining quality professional health care is imperative for individuals suffering from depression. Because many medical conditions have the same symptoms as depression, a thorough medical examination is important. Once a proper diagnosis of depression has been made, the treatment process can begin. In essence there are two primary sources of treatment—pharmaceuticals and psychotherapy. A discussion of both treatment types is presented in the following sections.

### Antidepressants

Antidepressant medications can be helpful for reducing the symptoms of depression. Sadly, there are several misconceptions about these powerful pharmaceuticals that prevent sufferers from seeking this treatment option. Moreover, there is also a great deal of confusion concerning the proper use of antidepressants. The following are some points to keep in mind in understanding the use of antidepressants:

- Taking an antidepressant should carry no stigma. After all, depression is not a character flaw. It is similar to medicating any other health condition such as diabetes or hypertension.
- Antidepressants must be taken daily as prescribed. They cannot be taken occasionally or when a patient feels “down.”
- Antidepressants may take 2-4 weeks with daily use before desired results are obtained.
- Any and all side effects should be reported to your doctor.

### Psychotherapy

Antidepressant medications are often used in combination with psychotherapy. In fact, research has demonstrated that a combination of the two has the best long-term results. And, the most effective form of psychotherapy for the treatment of depression is cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT). CBT rests on three primary assumptions that are important to understand when considering this treatment option.

The following are the primary assumptions used in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy:

1. Individuals actively process information regarding internal and external events.
2. Individuals must become active participants in treatment if they are to learn adaptive ways of responding to their problems.
3. There are reciprocal interactions among 5 key elements of CBT. They are environment, thoughts, emotions, behavior, and physiology.

Specifically, CBT emphasizes practical, problem-focused, skill

development for each of the aforementioned elements—environment, thoughts, emotions, behavior, and physiology. With respect to efficacy, this skill development often results in a highly successful and relatively brief therapy.

## Don't Lose Hope

By acknowledging the fact that depression is both common and easily treatable, we can hopefully one day look back on the issue of depression as a bygone anomaly. ★

*Figure 2*

### Strategies for Treating Depression in the Workplace

- Help breakdown the stigma often associated with a mental health condition.
- Don't diagnose the problem yourself, but learn the signs and symptoms of depression.
- Learn about the employee assistance program (EAP) and the insurance options of your company. Make this information available to your workers.
- Recognize the need for flexible work schedules while the employee is getting help. With some flexibility, continue to expect the employee to meet performance goals.
- Remember that severe depression may be life threatening to the employee, but rarely to others. If an employee makes comments like “life is not worth living” or “people would be better off without me,” take the statements seriously. Immediately call an EAP counselor or other specialist and seek advice on how to handle the situation.
- And, above all maintain confidentiality.

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